

The World Today: Why Modernity Matters More in Lesotho than in London

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Let me begin with a story. The place is Lesotho; the time is 1983. Mr. Lebona has declared his intention to build what he called a “European-style” house: a rectangular house with a cement floor and a steel roof. He mentioned this intention to an American anthropologist — James Ferguson is his name — who was at that time happily lodged in a traditional round house with mud-and-stone walls and a thatched grass roof, a house that stayed cool in summer and warm in winter. The well-meaning anthropologist asked Mr. Lebona why he would want to build a less practical, more expensive house. Why would he want a “European” house, when the “local” Sesotho round house had all the advantages? Mr. Lebona looked the anthropologist in the eye and asked, “What kind of house does your father have, there in America?” “Is it round?” No, it is rectangular, answered the anthropologist. “Does it have a grass roof?” No, it does not. “Does it have cattle dung for a floor?” No. “How many rooms does your father’s house have?” he asked. “About ten, I think,” mumbled the anthropologist. After pausing a moment to let this sink in, Mr. Lebona said, “*That is the direction we would like to move in.*”

Chastened, the earnest young anthropologist realized that Mr. Lebona’s aspiration for a European-style house was not simply a matter of copying Western ways, but it was — I quote the anthropologist again — “a powerful claim to a chance for transformed conditions of life — a place-in-the-world, a standard of living.” In short, “a direction we would like to move in.”¹

One name for the direction that moves toward such transformed conditions of life is “modernity.” But what exactly does “modernity” mean? The answer depends not only on time — the time when one asks or answers this question. It also depends on place, the country a person lives in and the person’s status in that country, his or her own “place-in-the-world,” as the anthropologist called it. Moreover, not everyone lives in the same time, even those who live in the same place in the same historical period, including the present one. This is because the unevenness always associated with modern societies and capitalist economies occurs within countries, within cities, within communities, as well as between them. If you live in a well-off country, one of the G-8 for example, and if you and your family are relatively well-off economically (with four rooms, say, rather than ten), you may think you are living in postmodern times, in the period after modernity. And you probably do not think that modernity is something to aspire to or reach out for. Or perhaps you have another name for what it is you aspire to and reach out for. Lucky you, one might say, living in the middle-class equivalent of a ten-room house, but for much of the world, modernity is not at all an antiquated abstraction. Modernity is instead a “folk category,” as some anthropologists have come to define it: “a concept that people use to make sense of their own lives, to make certain identity claims, to

1 James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 18-19 (italics mine).

give voice to certain kinds of aspirations they have for their lives. And in that sense, one has to take it very seriously. It's one of the discussions within which very important kinds of political, cultural, social claims are being made."²

Yet because the definition of modernity is neither monolithic nor static, we also have to take seriously what exactly such claims might mean. Here I focus broadly on how understandings of the modern have changed over the past several decades and what those changes might mean, not only for Lesotho and London, but for Tokyo, Delhi, Rio, and everywhere else.

Modernity As It Was – and As It Became

Modernity, once so consciously and assertively new, is by now an old idea. The conventional, historical definition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries centered on a collection of characteristics that Narita Ryūichi has called the “grammar of modernity.”³ These characteristics include the nation–state, a political form that increased in number from fifty nations at the beginning of the twentieth century to nearly two hundred today; capitalism in its industrial and postindustrial modes, which has changed socio-economic life across the globe, including in socialist economies; mass society, increasingly urbanized, with accompanying disruptions of communal life; a national citizenry, with the insistence, even if only rhetorical, on national political participation; national identity, knowing that one is Japanese, French, or Nigerian, a knowledge not required before the emergence of modern nation–states; and integration in the world order, what is now called globalization, which is not new, only intensified in recent times.

These characteristics are now numbingly familiar because they constitute a good deal of modernity as it happened. What in the nineteenth century was once prescriptive — modernity must/ought/will develop in ways described by Marx, Weber and others — has now become descriptive — this is the way modernity is, more or less, in the present–day. We live, for example, in a world of nation–states, with few viable alternative political forms on offer, the recent expansion of deterritorialization and globalization notwithstanding. When it comes to the economy, Hernando de Soto has famously insisted that in the twenty–first century “capitalism is the only game in town.”⁴ Global interdependence, too, has become inescapable, anywhere and everywhere on the globe. This by now empirical definition is both macro and national in focus, defining modernization in terms of entire societies, polities, and economies. It is also far too blunt an analytic instrument, assuming a linear and teleological process unfolding globally in the direction of progress, a happy tale from the nineteenth century that we now know not to be true: things can get worse, not better, while inequality remains the ground bass of modern historical change. Nonetheless, according to the canonical definition, the world is now modern, if in profoundly different and unequal ways.

The oft–told tales of becoming modern generally took the form of two master narratives of national history: one of emancipation (France, the United States, for example), the other of development (the majority of countries). Whatever the narrative, these national processes proceeded along two vectors. The first was modernization by force: in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, changes imposed by colonial powers, gunboat threats, and world–order imperatives such as sovereignty, imperialism, and international law; in the second half of the twentieth century changes imposed by the bipolar Cold War powers,

2 James Ferguson, “Theory Talk #34: James Ferguson on Modernity, Development and Reading Foucault in Lesotho,” <http://www.theory-talks.org/2009/11/theory-talk-34.html>. Also, *Global Shadows*, p. 177.

3 Narita Ryūichi, “Kindai no bunpō,” *Shisō* 845 (November 1994).

4 Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capitalism: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (London: Bantam, 2000), Ch. 7.

international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank, or the norms of neoliberal economics. This is what I call the *coercive modern*.

The second vector was modernization by aspiration, in which people reached for modernizing change. National and social reformers, militaries seeking national strength, capitalists pursuing expanded markets and profits, portions of the population disadvantaged by class, wealth, or power — a wider range of people than one might think regarded modern ways as desirable in themselves, judging modernity to be not only European in origin but universal in application. People reached for change, not only because circumstances forced them to, but also because they thought it served their individual, family, or community interests. Japanese peasants paying to send their children to school in great numbers is a late nineteenth-century instance; Mr. Lebona wanting a house with many rooms is an example from the late twentieth century. I call this the *aspirational modern*. Such people believed in what one scholar has called “the promissory notes” of modernity.⁵ This is what modern life offers — promises — to you.

If this is modernity as defined and experienced over two centuries of global history, then we might conclude, as some theorists of postmodernism do, that we are all modern now and can therefore move on to something else. But of course the promissory notes of modernity were either unevenly fulfilled, or for some people in some places, never fulfilled at all. And over the past several decades the definitions of modernity have gradually changed. In the second half of the twentieth century one can say that the two master narratives continued to hold sway, with the story of emancipation focused on liberation from colonial rule in much of Africa and South and Southeast Asia; and tales of development retaining their force in the Global South and beyond. But in recent years the main locus of action has shifted. Modernizing change — or change for the better — has come also to be described in terms that are less national than individual in focus; less as GDP-centered national economic growth than as jobs and livelihood; less as economic development than as human development; less as abstract freedom than as the possibility of personal choice. For this reason, such aspects as gender, health, and education have become central to the idea of development.

Everyday Modernity

We might think of this as everyday modernity: modernity in everyday life, modernity as a “folk category,” the kind of modernity Mr. Lebona in Lesotho wished to move in the direction of.

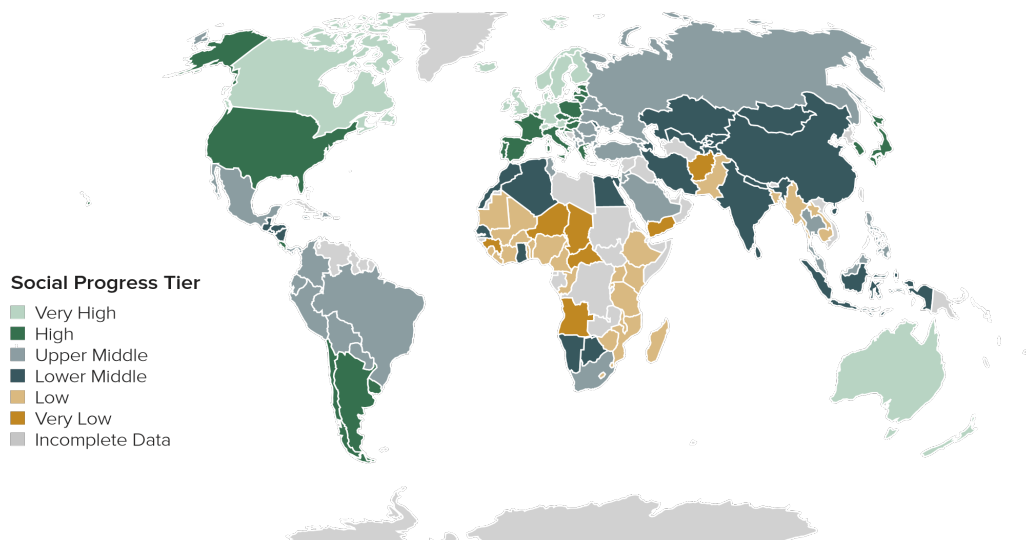
The discourse on development now includes a number of indices of such an everyday modernity. Perhaps the best known is the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which ranks countries by three criteria: life expectancy (health), access to knowledge (education) and standard of living (per capita income), with the goal of “human development for everyone.” Since 1990 the focus of the index has shifted from “pursuing material opulence to enhancing human well-being, from maximizing income to expanding capabilities, from optimizing growth to enlarging freedoms.” The stated emphasis falls on “the richness of human lives rather than on simply the richness of economies.”⁶ Despite efforts to escape “the tyranny of GDP,” the list of countries in the 2016 Human Development Report (for the year 2015) was headed by Norway, Australia, and Switzerland; the United States was tenth,

5 Bjorn Wittrock, “One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition,” *Daedalus*, v. 129, no. 1 (Winter, 2000), pp. 37-38.

6 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2016), p. 2. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2016_human_development_report.pdf

the United Kingdom sixteenth, and Japan seventeenth, all ranked in the top group of 51 countries with “very high human development,” out of a total of 188 countries. The majority in the group of 41 nations with “low human development” were in Sub-Saharan Africa, suggesting that decoupling the richness of human lives from the richness of economies will not be an easy task, the more so since the top 1% of the population holds 46% of the world’s wealth.⁷

The United Nations program in Human Security, a term introduced in the 1990s, declares a similar objective in its attempt to expand the traditional notion of national security into a “people-centered” approach that includes human rights, human dignity, and basic needs.⁸ The Global Social Progress Index, produced by the Social Progress Imperative, a non-profit organization based in the United States, measures basic human needs (food, water, sanitation); foundations of well-being (access to knowledge, health care, safe environment); and opportunity (rights, choice, inclusion, advanced education). Echoing others, the index seeks to avoid “traditional measurements of success like income and investment” and instead assess “the capacity of a society to meet the basic human needs of its citizens.... enhance and sustain the quality of their lives...and create the conditions for all individuals to reach their full potential.” In the 2017 report on 128 countries, the United States and Japan were in the second group (High Social Progress), while the Scandinavian countries, Canada, and others were in the first (Very High Social Progress), and Sub-Saharan African nations ranked in the lowest two categories.⁹



The World Happiness Index, first published in 2012 by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, ranks 155 countries based on Gallup World Polls, which brings subjective perceptions to bear on the subject. The results are ranked according to six key variables: GDP per capita (income), healthy years of life expectancy, social support (having someone to count on in times of trouble), trust

7 Ibid., pp. 198-201; wealth, p. 7. The “tyranny of GDP” is frequently mentioned by Helen Clark, UNDP administrator from 2009-17, e.g., <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/speeches/2017/02/11/helen-clark-keynote-speech-at-the-global-dialogue-for-happiness-where-is-happiness-on-the-global-agenda.html>

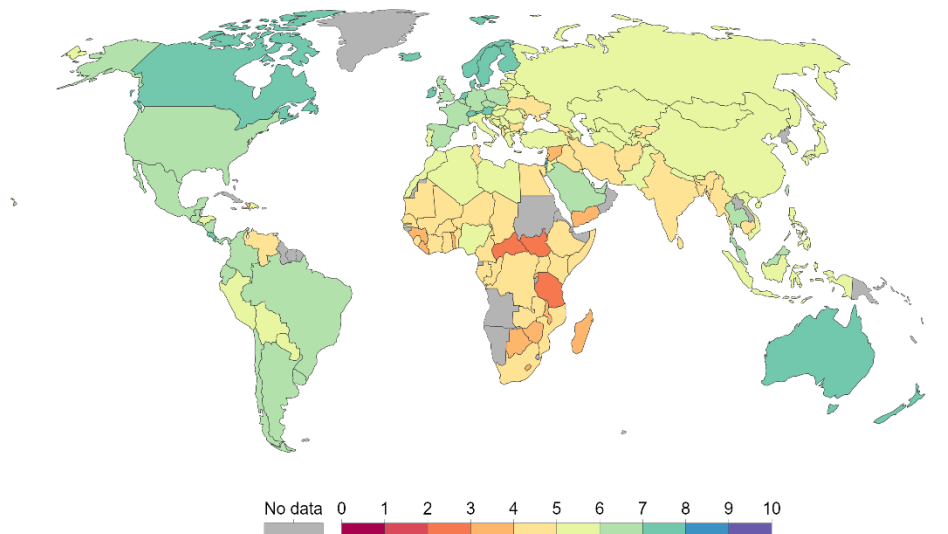
8 E.g. Introduction by UN Secretary General to the Report on Human Security to the General Assembly, May 20, 2010. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/ga10942.doc.htm>

9 Michael E. Porter and Scott Stern with Michael Green, *Social Progress Index 2017* (Washington, Social Progress Imperative, 2017); rankings, pp.4-5 ; map, p. 23. <http://www.socialprogressimperative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/English-2017-Social-Progress-Index-Findings-Report.pdf>

(perceived absence of corruption in government and business), perceived freedom to make life decisions, and generosity (recent donations to others). In the 2017 report Scandinavian countries and Switzerland ranked at the top, the United States 14th (the U.S. has never made the top ten, sliding further in 2018 to 18th place), the United Kingdom, 19th, Japan 52nd, South Korea 56th, China 80th. Taiwan, the happiest country in East Asia, ranked 33rd.¹⁰ Many of the nations in Africa, while far too diverse to wrap up in a single continental package, had what the report calls a “happiness deficit.”¹¹

Self-reported Life Satisfaction, 2016

Life satisfaction is self-reported as the answer to the following question: “Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”



Source: World Happiness Report (2017)

OurWorldInData.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction/ • CC BY-SA

Initially greeted by critics (and cynics) as soft news, the World Happiness Index has gained in credence in recent years, not least because its results are similar to those of the other indices that have sprung up. Many of these initiatives were influenced by prominent critics of GDP-ism such as the economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, whose 2009 report proposed well-being, quality of life, environmental sustainability, and the like, as better metrics for economic performance than statistics based solely on GDP.¹² In sum, these several indices and others like them betoken at least a discursive, if not a decisive, shift in definitions of development, a better life, and, in many places, a more “modern” one.

The increasingly important place of gender appears in nearly every recent measure of social well-being. The Global Gender Gap Report, published annually by the World Economic Forum, tracks data on women in the economy, education, health, and politics in societies around the world. The 2017 report had (no surprise) Scandinavia ranked the highest, with Rwanda as number 4 between Finland and Sweden; the United Kingdom 15th; the United States, 49th; and Japan, extremely low on the list, at 114th of 144 countries.¹³

There are other such indices, such as the Better Life Index of the OECD, Afrobarometer, Americas

10 John Helliwell, et al., *World Happiness Report 2017* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2017), pp. 20-22. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2017/HR17-Ch2.pdf>

11 Valerie Møller, et al., “Waiting for Happiness’ in Africa,” *ibid.*, pp. 85, 108-9

12 Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (2009). <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/118025/118123/Fitoussi+Commission+report>

13 *Global Gender Gap Report 2017* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2017), pp. 10-11.

Barometer, and so on. Their categories relate in one way or another to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to be reached by 2030. (These replaced the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, which were meant to be achieved by 2015). The new set has seventeen Goals, beginning with No Poverty and Zero Hunger on through Good Health and Well-being, Gender Equality, to Climate Action and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.



The SDGs are intended to be “universal” (applying to developed and developing countries alike) — which is new (the Millennium Development Goals targeted only developing countries) — “inclusive” (leaving no one behind), and “planetary” (sustaining the natural resources on which human society depends).¹⁴ Although the word “modern” is used here primarily as an adjective (modern technology, modern health care, modern energy), in fact the SDGs envision a program of social, national, and international development in the name of progress and a better life. As promissory notes, the SDGs are likely to prove as unattainable as the goals of modernity of the nineteenth and twentieth century, but their focus clearly lies elsewhere, less centered on national economy and security than on the well-being of individual human beings and their social lives in the spaces of everyday modernity.

Africa and the Global Modern

Where does Africa fit in the revised definitions of what might be regarded as a new global modern? A continent of fifty-four countries, with 1.2 billion people who constitute 16% of the world’s population — 70% of whom are younger than thirty years old — Africa by 2050 will have 2.5 billion people and a quarter of the earth’s population. The world often subsumes these vastly diverse countries under a single continental perspective, often negative, with frequent references to failed states, kleptocracy, HIV/Aids, abject poverty, and the like. Similar views underlay the requirements of Structural Adjustment for World Bank and IMF loans in the 1980s and the conditions of good governance and open economies required for debt forgiveness in the 1990s and 2000s. The generally pessimistic neoliberal view of the “hopeless continent” was countered in the first decade of the twenty-first century by the image of “Africa Rising,” a narrative of economic growth that itself became something of a stereotype, which was more recently counter-countered by depictions of terrorism and civil war.

The economic fortunes of the poorest parts of the developing world continue to be a topic of debate.

14 E.g., “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, September 25, 2015). http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E, Chart of the goals, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

In 2007, 70% of the “bottom billion” of the world’s poor lived in Africa; with dim prospects for relief, either from their own government or from international aid, which often failed reach its target populations.¹⁵ In 2015, in contrast, a cheerful economist celebrated the present as “a time of the Greatest Development Progress among the Global poor in the history of the world,” including many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ This division of opinion is nothing new, but in terms of the indices quoted here and reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, many countries in Subsaharan Africa are still beset by extreme poverty, a fact recognized even by the cheerful economists. And while child mortality rates have declined sharply, African women and girls are still deprived of health care, education, and other social goods included in the Human Development Index.

In the World Happiness Index Africa is the unhappiest continent. Its chapter in the 2017 report is entitled “Waiting for Happiness,” from the title of a 2002 film by the Mauritanian director, Abderrahmane Sissko. Unsurprisingly, the more “lived poverty” (the term used by Afrobarometer), the less happiness. Mr Lebona’s Lesotho ranks 139 of 155 countries. In the Human Development Index, Lesotho is 160th out of 188 countries, with violence-riven Central African Republic at the bottom. In the Social Progress Index, Lesotho ranks 103 of 128, followed by mostly Sub-Saharan African countries, with Central African Republic again in the lowest place. But in the Gender Gap Report, Lesotho ranks quite high, at 57th of 144 countries, not much below Italy at 50th and far, far above Japan at 114th. Women in Lesotho have miserably low scores in health and education, but high scores in political empowerment (women in government) and in economic participation and opportunity. This means that women are less unequal compared to men, not necessarily that their wages, jobs, or livelihoods are improved, rather that some half of the men and women are either doing better while the rest remain impoverished, only more equally so than in other places.



If one asks what Africans want, the answer is exactly what the new global goals say they should have: basic human needs (food, water); access to health care; employment (for a surging youth population without work and no industrial sector to absorb them); a decent standard of living; education; infrastructure (roads, etc.); less corruption and more democracy. There is also an expressed desire for “inclusion” — a word heard almost as often among Africans discussing their future as “sustainable” is heard in devel-

15 Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

16 Stephen Radelet, *The Great Surge: The Ascent of the Developing World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), pp. 3-5.

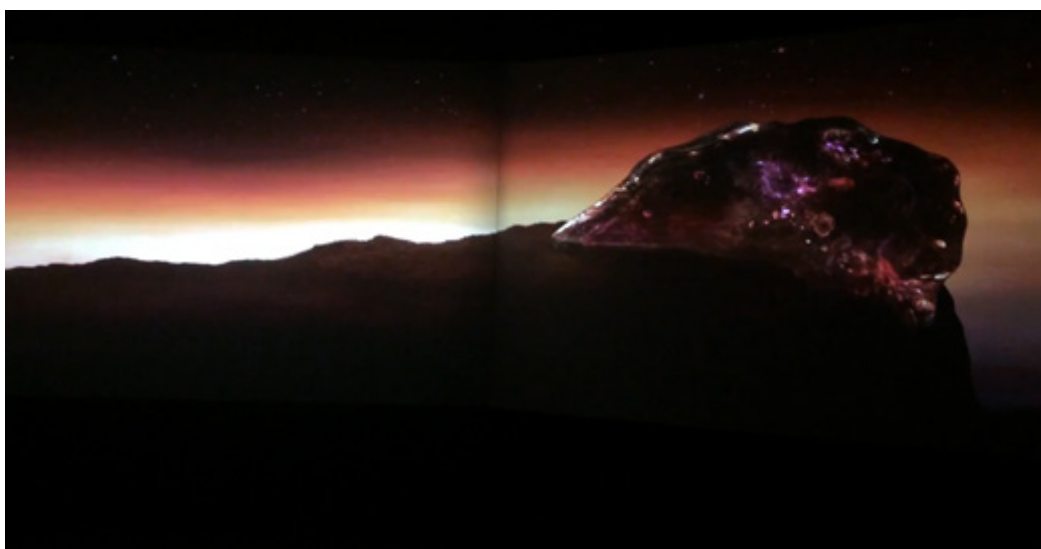
opment circles at the United Nations. “Inclusion” stands against inequality, powerlessness, and a lack of individual or familial choice. And what do Africans get, in their view? At home, civil war, corrupt leaders, epidemics, and encroaching climate change; from the world, international aid that often misses the mark because it does not lay down local roots (in health care delivery, for examples), foreign direct investment, including land grabs and exploitation of resources, including labor, not only by the former imperial powers but by Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese enterprises. The explosive expansion of China in investment, infrastructure funding, trade, Chinese workers, and the like is both welcomed and bemoaned, the attitudes varying by country and socio-economic status.¹⁷ Investment and economic benefits on the one hand, exploitation and disempowerment on the other repeats a pattern familiar from the long years of European colonial rule.

Yet it is also true that expectations for the future are higher among Africans, and even higher among African youth, than is the case in “happier” societies elsewhere. According to one study, optimism is frequently strong among the poorest and least secure, where it often correlates with more positive attitudes about democracy than about the market. Critics argue that material wealth in itself is not enough and that consumerist modernity can be as much a burden as a promise for the future. Such a view is expressed in a work of video art by Wangechi Mutu entitled “The End of Carrying All.” It features a woman walking across an African landscape carrying a basket on her head. As she trudges along the basket fills with the trappings of modern life: first household objects, a bicycle wheel and satellite dish, then oil rigs and skyscrapers. The burden of material modernity gradually grows so heavy that it weighs her down to the ground, representing both the negative aspects of development and the role of women in African life and labor. As the woman and her burden meet the future – or the end of the world – the basket of modern objects, now a large and unwieldy blob, topples off a cliff into the abyss.¹⁸



17 Fei-Ling Wang and Esi A. Elliot, “China in Africa: Presence, Perceptions and Prospects,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23, no. 90 (2014), pp. 1012-32.

18 Wangechi Mutu, “The End of Carrying All,” Venice Biennale 2015: All the World’s Futures. Born in Kenya in 1972, the artist lives and works in the U.S.



In contrast to this powerful if bleak vision of the future of uneven capitalist development, sometimes a different, often buoyant future can feel as if it has already arrived. In large cities in Africa as in India, for example, youth (and others) are connected electronically, in what has been called “pirate modernity,” or “recycled modernity,” in which cell phones and other devices are taken apart, and repurposed, producing a shadowy but dynamic economic zone of internet connectivity and ingenious chargers that outwit the lack of electricity and capital. Such technological failures as computer breakdowns and degradation of well-worn digital media produce not only obstacles but spurs to creativity. Studies of the way contemporary media both impede and enable locally created music and video in urban sites like Kano in Nigeria and Soweto in South Africa reveal new technologies of everyday — and aspirational — modernity.¹⁹

Everyday Modernity and Global Responsibility

If we are indeed to pursue the goal of “human development for everyone,” as declared by the United Nations, it will require considerably transformation of thought and action, both at home and in the international arena. Modernity means more in Lesotho than in London in part because we have yet to revise our understanding of the meaning of modernity in the twenty-first century. Most people agree that London and Tokyo are modern in the older definition of the term, but if everyday modernity is the goal, then it remains far from achieved, precisely because so many are excluded from it. And everywhere the excluded tend to be the same parts of society: minorities and marginal groups, the indigent and the indigenous, women and foreigners, and so on. Uneven modernity across the globe is matched by uneven modernity at home. The goals of everyday modernity hold not only for the developing world but for the poor, disenfranchised, and unempowered in the heart of the global North. Just as Africans deserve our attention to their aspirations for a better life, so, too, do all those left behind who live down the street or across the county.

What are the conditions that impede the aspirational modern in places like Lesotho, and how does Japanese (or any other) foreign aid, policy, and investment make things better or worse for people like Mr. Lebona? And what are the conditions at home that make Japan rank so (unmodernly) low in the gender gap, so much lower than Lesotho? While it may seem that such comparisons are odious, that is precisely the point: no one occupies a privileged position in terms of fulfilling the aspirations for progress and a better life. The task, it seems to me, is to try to improve our global modernity, at home and abroad, in order to impel it, as Mr. Lebona said, toward “a direction we would like to move in” — toward a better, more humane “place-in-the-world” — for everyone, everywhere, in the everyday.

19 Ravi Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India,” *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (Summer, 1999), pp. 59-65; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Gavin Steingo, “Sound and Circulation: Immobility and Obduracy in South African Electronic Music,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24, no. 1, pp. 102-23.